

Ambassador James Zumwalt
Press Conference and Opening Remarks in Bissau
December 14, 2016; Bissau Liaison Office

Good afternoon and thank you all for coming today. As you may know, this is my tenth and final visit to Bissau as I will be departing my post as Ambassador next month. So before I open up the conference to questions, I wanted to make some remarks about my time here.

On one of my first trips, I visited Titina Silà's memorial – the beloved heroine of the struggle for independence – a memory that will stay with me forever. The more I learned about her efforts, the more it became clear she is a symbol of the great contributions that Bissau-Guineans have made toward nation-building and pushing for democracy for all.

This trip is bittersweet. I am proud of the work we've done with the people of Guinea-Bissau, but I will greatly miss my time in your wonderful country. Whether visiting the beautiful Boloma-Bijagós islands and eating your amazing seafood, to meeting the people of Cacheu and Oio and learning more about your fascinating history, culture, and music, Ann and I have enjoyed the opportunity to get to know your country.

I am thrilled today to inaugurate this renovated space in our Bissau Liaison Office and I can think of no more fitting event to end my tenure here in Bissau. The inauguration of this space represents our strong and continued commitment to the people and country of Guinea-Bissau.

I've really enjoyed getting to know many of you. The foundation of any strong democracy is a vibrant and independent media and I was pleased we were able play a role sponsoring the investigative journalism and ethics training as well as our more recent Fact Check workshop. The public is counting on you to provide balanced and accurate information.

When I arrived, the region was in the midst of the Ebola crisis. But the international community responded and worked tirelessly with Bissau-Guinean civil society and health authorities to contain the disease. And now, the United States, through the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, is supporting multi-year programs with the National Institute of Health (INASA) and international partners to build capacity to monitor health conditions, detect outbreaks, and respond to public health emergencies.

To strengthen rule of law, the U.S. Government has given \$500,000 to UN Development Program to strengthen this country's judicial system, and increase professionalism of the police, prosecutors and judges. Another \$200,000 has gone to UN Office of Drugs and Crime to train the Judicial Police to fight drug trafficking.

We have also hosted two successful civil-military workshops to bring members of civil society and the military community together.

We've given \$30,000 of small grants to local projects including Friends of the Child (AMIC) to rehabilitate a classroom, provided solar panels for the orphanages of Casa Emmanuel and Bethel, and given vocational training equipment to the West African Vocational School in Canchungo.

Hungry children have a harder time learning or staying in school. We have worked with the Ministry of Education and World Food Program to provide daily school meals to primary school children in 638 schools in eight districts with the aim of reducing short-term hunger while contributing to school enrollment, attendance, and graduation rates. 173,400 primary school students benefit from these school meals.

One of my favorite parts of diplomacy is people-to-people engagement. In the last two years, six young Bissau-Guinean leaders have participated in Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Mandela Washington Program. They travelled to the United States to hone important skills in entrepreneurship and public service. They are now using these skills at home to build a brighter future for your country. This year, we were also joined by a full-time English Language Fellow at Tchico Te Teacher Training College. He is working with English teachers to develop English curricula.

When I arrived two years ago there was a lot of optimism among donors and potential investors about the future of Guinea-Bissau. They all saw the tremendous potential following the free and fair elections. Things appeared to be off to a new start.

But the country has not benefitted from a stable government since. The frequent changes of government in the past 18 months have made it difficult for donors to launch development programs. The international community hopes that Guinea-Bissau will maintain strong institutions, rule of law, and continue to protect human rights, and we commend the military for respecting constitutional order.

While momentum has been lost, I am still optimistic. Yesterday I visited a small village in Oio where people are taking their future into their own hands. They are building a school and sanitation system themselves because they want a better future for their children. These people are carrying out the vision of Amilcar Cabral. It is Bissau-Guineans like this that represent the hope of the country.

Regardless of the political situation, civil society moves forward. Where the political class has failed, Bissau-Guineans are resourcefully banding together to provide health care and schools for their classmates, co-workers, and communities.

I have great hope for Guinea-Bissau as I have met its citizens, civil activists, military leaders, journalists, and the next generation, hungry for more opportunities and a stable future. We remain committed to the people of Guinea-Bissau. And I know better things lie ahead.

So again, thank you for the hospitality you have shown me.